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ABSTRACT

The National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC) was established in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. One of NESIC's duties is to identify areas in which specific educational standards ought to be developed. Several complex issues arise in carrying out this duty, such as: the need for standards in such non-content areas as student performance, definition and measurement of standards, accommodation of variability and individualization, one or multiple performance standards, the voluntary nature of the standards, and standards as a de facto national curriculum. Another basic duty of NESIC is to certify voluntary national content standards and voluntary student performance standards. A number of questions arise here as well, such as what subjects should be included, the place of education of feelings and emotions, development of attitudes as tolerance or taking risks, inclusion of family life and health education, and the role of community service. In the area of opportunity-to-learn standards, there are uncertainties regarding what is "fair," what is "restricting" to State and local control of curriculum, and what will protect teachers' professional autonomy. Also needed is a clear articulation by NESIC of how assessment and content are to be aligned, along with strong measures to maintain that alignment. (Contains 11 endnotes.) (JDD)

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Goals 2000 and the Role of the National Education Standards and Improvement Council

by

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Introduction

The recommendation in A Nation at Risk that "schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards," (1) asserted that the notion of standards was central to the educational reform movement and brought it to the forefront of the educational and political debate, where it has remained ever since. Not surprisingly, the idea was taken up by President Bush in his address to the Governors at the Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1989, where he called for greater a greater sense of direction, combined with competitiveness, accountability, and results in education. These themes, along with the aspiration to "promote world class standards" were reflected in the Bill, "America 2000 Excellence in Education Act," which President Bush sent to Congress in May 22, 1991. Two years later, when President Clinton sent his Bill, "Goals 2000: Educate America Act," to Congress, the emphasis on competitiveness and accountability may have been softened but not the commitment to standards. In fact, in this Bill, and in the Act which was subsequently passed and signed into law by the President, standards abound, even to the point where they are given a statutory institutional existence in the form of the National Education Standards and Improvement Council, NESIC.

The specific duties laid down for NESIC indicate the ambitious nature of Goals 2000. They also indicate a conceptualization of the role of NESIC that is coherent, informed and shaped by the expanding knowledge base of curriculum, teaching and assessment, and tied into current developments in the profession, notably the efforts underway in many subject areas to develop new standards. In any examination of the duties and the terms of reference of NESIC, accordingly, one is confronted with many of the central and frequently controversial conceptual as well as practical and professional issues in the field, a compliment to the framers of Goals 2000, even if one might not agree with the positions taken.

NESIC has five basic duties, the others being largely derivative of them. These are: to identify areas in which standards ought to be developed; to certify the content and performance standards; to identify and develop the criteria for certifying such standards; to develop criteria for, certify, and assist in the development of exemplary national opportunity-to-learn standards; and to certify State assessments (Sec. 213). In the Congressional hearings and debate leading up to the passage of Goals 2000, and in discussions among educators concerning its provisions and the significance of its enactment, the idea of standards and the role of NESIC attracted its share of attention, (2) and I do not intend to take up every issue. I shall focus instead upon the remit of NESIC as set forth in the Act to deal with standards. My intent is not primarily to be critical but to anticipate some of the pitfalls surrounding the work of NESIC.

Areas and standards

It is concerns about the linkage of economic prosperity to educational achievement in an age of increasing global interdependence and competition, that led to Goals 2000 and, specifically, to the remit of NESIC to identify areas in which specific educational

standards ought to be developed. Given the complexities of modern economic and educational systems, this may be a daunting task but it is one on which some headway has been made both in this country and elsewhere. The most pertinent example is the national goals of education incorporated in Goals 2000 in which, for example, the areas of English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history and geography are pinpointed (Sec. 102 (3)(A)). Given the historical emphasis on such content areas in schooling, and the continuing esteem in which they are held by educators and the public, these areas are neither surprising nor difficult to pick out. It is a feature of Goals 2000, however, that it also identifies the need for standards in non-content areas, notably, opportunity-to-learn standards and student performance standards. This is impressive. It does, however, bring us into somewhat uncharted territory.

Non-content standards offer new challenges to educators because they have not been the object of such public scrutiny nor agreement as content standards. Defining opportunity-to-learn standards, moreover, is but one task; the areas for which there ought to be such standards must also be determined. A number of these areas are presented in the Act, such as the quality and availability of curricula, instructional materials, and technologies (Sec. 213 (c)(2)). The first of the national goals is, perhaps, a more general example of such an area, namely, that every child will start school ready to learn. Presumably, this means that each child is given the opportunity--the necessary pre-school learning experiences such as one associates with Headstart, for example--to be prepared to learn by the time he or she comes to school.

Once areas in which standards are to be established have been identified, attention may turn to standards themselves, especially to what is meant by standards, how they are to be defined and justified, and how their attainment is to be measured. Once again, it is in the academic content areas or subjects that much of the public debate on standards and measuring their attainment has been focused. But what exactly is meant by standards, especially as it pertains to the non-content areas? One commentator, for example, has suggested that the term is inappropriate in education because it brings with it an industrial mindset in which the concern is with uniformity of process and product rather than individuality. (3) Standards in education may also be conceived in other ways, however. This is true of Goals 2000, I believe, which relies heavily on the conceptualization of standards established by the Standards Task Force of the National Council on Educational Standards and Testing. According to the Task Force, a comprehensive view of standards in education contains several elements, including content standards, student performance standards, school delivery standards, and system delivery standards. (4) Standards, understood as student performance standards, depart from the adherence to uniformity when they allow for variable levels of attainment in a subject, and there is nothing in the language of Goals 2000 which rules out such an approach to performance standards; if anything, it accommodates such individualization even in performance standards (Sec. 213 (f)(2)(F)).

If performance standards may be variable, what about content and opportunity-to-learn standards? Historically, content standards have been variable. This has lead to charges of tracking and discrimination by some but has been welcomed as responsiveness to individual differences among students by others. (5) Nowhere have variable standards prevailed as they have in regard to opportunity-to-learn standards, however, with the well documented gap that exists as between standards in the suburbs and those in the inner cities. As the Sheff vs O'Neill case in Connecticut demonstrates, this is a gap as wide today as that which existed between the hotel accommodation available to black baseball players, such as Curt Flood, and his white Cardinal teammates in the mid-sixties. It is also repugnant to the ideals of an egalitarian society.

Referring to student performance standards, Marshall S. Smith, one of the architects of Goals 2000, has observed that whether there should be one or multiple performance standards will be a matter of debate. (6) If the industrial model, with its emphasis on uniformity and management is unsuited to education, then it is imperative that NESIC should steer clear of any such orientation. But if there is to be an appeal for variability of standards in the matter of performance what kind of logic are we to invoke if we are to deny--even in the name of equality--such variability in the case of opportunity-to-learn standards and, perhaps, content standards as well?

What I have been saying about standards gives us some indication of the scope of the remit of NESIC in regard to identifying areas where standards ought to be established and what may be involved in establishing standards themselves. Beyond the practical and theoretical problems involved in dealing with standards there is also a complex constitutional matter, one which leaves a distinctive and indelibile mark on the very language of Goals 2000. Of significance in this regard is the fact that the standards are to be 'voluntary' and 'national'; especially significant is the actual impact of that language.

The emphasis upon 'national' and 'voluntary' at once marks the aspiration contained within the Act that all Americans aspire to the same high standards, and the limitations imposed by established practice, in which the setting of standards is primarily a state and local prerogative. One might, in fact, go farther and say that the central thrust of Goals 2000 is the raising of standards nationwide in the face of limits imposed by the constitution, whereby the states rather than the federal government are the rightful authority in matters of education. The Charlottesville Summit sought a way around this constitutional obstacle by first bringing together the President and the Governors of all the states to forge national goals of education that were agreed upon by both sides. This set the scene for the formal adoption of the goals and the means of attaining them, namely, Goals 2000, as federal government educational policy. To ensure that Goals 2000 and the standards it wishes to establish as national standards remain constitutional, these standards must be voluntary. The question is, how voluntary--and how constitutional?

Standards adopted as a result of Goals 2000 are voluntary in the legal sense because the legislation does not require schools to adopt any standards established by the federal government or those of its

agencies such as NESIC. Given, moreover, that the monies that the Act provides for are modest by comparison with those provided for educational programs such as Chapter 1, the financial inducements for compliance are relatively slight. But financial inducements are not the only ones that come into play. While the standards may remain voluntary in a legal sense, those states and districts that adopt them, and the graduates of their schools, will gain the benefits of belonging to the club, in much the same way that a university business school that is accredited by the national accrediting agency--and for which universities have invested millions of dollars across the country--gains benefits from belonging to the club. The same will hold true for assessments. Those schools that prepare their students for NESIC-approved State assessments will be giving their students an important edge when it comes to gaining entry to universities and employment, on the assumption that such examinations gain the level of acceptability one associates with state testing in other countries or with tests such as the SAT and the ACT in this country. That's how voluntary the voluntary national standards are. So, how constitutional are they?

Given what has just been said, and given that it is voluntary national standards--content, student performance and opportunity-to-learn standards--that bring us to this point, the question has to arise, how far removed is a national curriculum? In fact, are we not actually talking about a national curriculum--at least de facto, if not de jure? For, to focus upon content standards for a moment, what does it mean to talk of content standards as abstracted from content? It means nothing. It is only through content that content standards can be manifest. And it is only through the acquisition of such content that content standards can be attained. To specify content standards is to specify content, and to specify content is to specify curriculum. If all students are held to the same content standards--voluntarily or otherwise--we have a national curriculum--whether federal or otherwise.

As some of you may know, I am not personally uncomfortable with the idea of a national curriculum, at least in some circumstances. But here we are talking about a national curriculum instituted by an Act sent to Congress by a President who is on record as objecting to a national curriculum! (7) Put differently, if there is substantial opinion which objects to a national curriculum, including the President and the National Governors Association, why do we get one? Has the language of Goals 2000 duped the President himself and enabled the federal government to circumvent the constitutional rights of the states in education? And can NESIC do anything to make a national curriculum go away, or is NESIC, in a few years down the road, to become the scapegoat for its introduction?

The certification of standards and the criteria

The second basic duty of NESIC is to "certify voluntary national content standards and voluntary student performance standards... that define what all students should know and be able to do" (Sec. 213 (a)(1)(B)). Few will object to the idea that students should know and be able to do something. Standards within the various disciplines typically speak directly to what it is that students should know and be able to do within the subjects. A number of questions arise

nonetheless. The national goals identify nine subjects where students are expected to demonstrate competence. Originally fewer were presented; and one could argue for yet others to be added. This raises the difficult question of what knowledge and performance skills ought to be included and excluded--why these subjects and not others. The Act does not offer an explanation, yet clearly what the list was or should be is not self-evident. It also raises other questions that may be less obvious.

Should the range of what a student is taught in school to know and be able to do be delimited by the established academic disciplines, such as those enshrined in the national goals? Many have argued that it should; yet for centuries schools and parents have taught values, skills and attitudes pertaining to moral, social and religious attitudes and behavior that do not pertain to the disciplines as these are normally interpreted in the curriculum. Some argue that conventional academic knowledge excludes from the curriculum many of the very attitudes and skills that make for a prosperous workplace, a harmonious community, personal fulfillment, attitudes such as tolerance, a willingness to work, teamwork, taking initiatives, taking responsibility, taking risks, and cooperating with others, and have even questioned if the pursuit of academic knowledge is detrimental to the development of economy-rich capacities such as an entrepeneurial approach. Others may question if knowledge and understanding can always be comprehended and made manifest in behavioral terms. Additionally, one may ask, what place, if any, is there to be for the education of feelings and emotions, education in family living, and health education? (8) Judging by the list of subjects favored in the national goals, all such areas as these are, at the least, in jeopardy.

To this one might respond that while the Act identifies nine subjects by name, it does not expressly rule out any. Additionally, in developing standards, NESIC is to address the extent to which standards have been developed through "an open and public process that provides for input and involvement of all relevant parties," including teachers, employers and institutions of higher education among others, any of which could, presumably call for the inclusion of important content considered to be absent. (Sec. 213. (a)(2)(B)(iii)) In developing its criteria, moreover, NESIC is to "work with entities that are developing, or have already developed, content and student performance standards..." (Sec. 213 (a)(2)(C)) These entities are, undoubtedly, the various subject organizations currently engaged in standard setting. What is interesting about the twofold directive to NESIC on this point is the requirement that while it is to work with the subject organizations in developing criteria, it is also required to consult with a much wider range of publics or interest groups.

This being so, the kinds of non-academic knowledge, attitudes and skills, in areas such as interpersonal relations to which I already referred, and which may have as much to do with process as content, may well come into the reckoning when NESIC begins to identify its content and student performance standards. The outcome will be both interesting and of considerable practical significance for the kind of curriculum possibilities that schools may pursue. Of special significance will be the relative weight given to traditional subject

matter, as contrasted with such areas of experience as community service and orientation to work, which are highly celebrated in Boyer's High School and the Carnegie report on the middle school, Turning Points. (9) It may be noteworthy here, too, that while Britain's Educational Reform Act of 1990 is considered to be highly prescriptive in curriculum matters, at least in theory, it did allow schools the freedom to determine the content of up to 30% of the school curriculum as the school saw fit.

Opportunity to learn

The fourth basic duty of NESIC is to "certify exemplary, voluntary national opportunity-to-learn standards that will establish a basis for providing all students a fair opportunity to achieve the knowledge and skills set out in the voluntary national content standards certified by the Council." (Sec. 213 (c)(1)) These standards, moreover, are to be "sufficiently general to be used by any State without restricting State and local control of curriculum and prerogatives regarding instructional methods to be employed." (Sec. 213 (e))

Opportunity-to-learn standards are not the stuff of traditional legislation in the educational sphere and one might be rightly puzzled by what is meant by 'exemplary opportunity-to-learn standards.' As in other areas of the Act, however, clarification of what is intended is provided. In dealing with this issue, accordingly, the following matters are to be addressed: the quality and availability of curricula, instructional materials, and technologies; the capability of teachers to provide high-quality instruction in each content area; the extent to which teachers and administrators have access to professional development, including the best knowledge about teaching, learning, and school improvement; the extent to which curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments are aligned to content standards; the extent to which schools are safe; and the extent to which school policies are non-discriminatory. (Sec. 213 (c)(2)) In carrying out these duties, moreover, NESIC shall identify what countries with rigorous content standards do to provide their children with opportunities to learn, to prepare their teachers, and to provide continuing professional development opportunities for their teachers. NESIC shall also develop criteria to be used for certifying the voluntary national opportunity-to-learn standards (Sec. 213 (c)(3)).

From what has been said here, it is evident that opportunity-to-learn standards have to do with the conditions of teaching and learning, and the unsurprising if not so readily attainable intention of the Act is to ensure that all children experience conditions that are actually conducive to learning. There are aspects of this subsection of the Act, however, to which can not so readily agree.

This is due, in part, to uncertainties regarding terminology. What, for example, does it mean to say that all students will have a fair opportunity to achieve and that standards are to be sufficiently general as not to restrict State and local control of curriculum and prerogatives regarding instructional methods? These are vague terms, and depending upon who decides what is 'fair' and 'restricting,' not much may change in either the conditions of learning for deprived children or the conditions of teaching for regulation-bound teachers.

The fact that it is 'state and local prerogatives', as distinct from any prerogatives that teachers might have, that are to be relieved of restrictions regarding instructional methods, is especially odd. Instructional methods, one would have thought was the preserve of the teacher, and it prompts the question what protections do teachers have to practice their profession without restrictions--imposed possibly by 'state and local prerogatives'--on their professional autonomy? Teachers and administrators may well need professional development and opportunities for development of the kind provided for in the Act. If they are to avail of them, however, they should also have the opportunity, and not merely the obligation, to put them to use as professionals without intrusion.

The notion of exemplary standards merits attention also. Of all the duties of NESIC set forth in the Act in relation to standards, the opportunity-to-learn standards is is the only case where the concern of NESIC is to be with exemplary standards. The reason for this is unclear and it may be because identifying standards in this area is less well advanced than in the areas of content and even student performance standards. If so, the aspiration is to be commended but it also sends a warning: if some exemplary standards can be identified they ought not be elevated to the extent that they restrict the identification of other and even better ones with the passage of time and an increase in our knowledge. Masell (10) has drawn attention to the need for content standards to be dynamic and continuously updated and the implementation difficulties that come with this; the same will be true of opportunity-to-learn standards. Neither may one blithely assume that opportunity-to-learn standards employed by those countries with rigorous content standards are necessarily to be copied: these reflect underlying social values and aspirations which may be quite at odds with ideals of egalitarianism and civil rights for all children which permeate public education in the United States and the Act itself.

There is a point of overlap between opportunity-to-learn standards and assessment which brings me to one final point that I wish to consider. This is the reference to the "alignment" of assessment to content standards--and presumably student performance standards. This is of particular importance in dealing with opportunity-to-learn standards, and, in this context, the term 'alignment' is too ambiguous for comfort. It is long recognized that examinations, especially external public examinations, have a profound impact on curriculum and teaching. (11) Conceivably, this impact could be favorable but is generally considered to undermine educational goals and objectives. This is not because curriculum, teaching and assessment are not aligned with content standards; maybe even too well aligned but in the wrong configuration, with assessment dictating what is taught and how it is taught.

This in not what is intended in Goals 2000, and the entire project speaks for this insofar as it began with an identification of national goals of education. From these goals have flowed comprehensive and broadly coherent strategies to advance the goals. Not least among them is the identification of content, student performance, and opportunity to learn standards. This being the case, the correct alignment of curriculum, teaching, assessment, and content

standards, is one in which assessment serves to measure how well the content and student and performance standards have been attained--in a word, what has been taught and learned. The challenge, as it has been in educational systems throughout the past century, is to keep it that way. Given what experience shows to be the enormity of this challenge, to require of those states that voluntarily buy into Goals 2000 that assessment and content are to be merely aligned, therefore, is inadequate. A clear articulation by NESIC of how they are to be aligned, along with strong measures to maintain that alignment in practice, is necessary. If not, it is not an exaggeration to say that the survival of the basic thrust and intent of Goals 2000, as it has been conceived and presented up to this point, may be doomed to failure.

Endnotes

1. National Commission on Excellence in Education. A Nation at Risk (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983), p. 27.

2. Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, Hearing, May 4, 1993; Kenneth S. Goodman, "Standards, NOT!" Education Week, September 7, 1994, pp. 39, 41; and Howard Gardner, "The need for an anti-babel standard." Education Week. September 7, 1994, pp. 56, 44.

3. Goodman, "Standards, NOT," p. 39.

4. Cited in Marshall S. Smith, Susan H. Fuhrman, and Jennifer O'Day, "National Curriculum Standards: Are they Desirable and Feasible?" in Richard F. Elmore and Susan H. Fuhrman, eds, The Governance of Curriculum (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 1994), p. 15

5. See, for example, Mortimer J. Adler, The Paideia Proposal (New York: Macmillan, 1982) and the debate that followed in Harvard Educational Review 53, no. 4 (November 1983): 380-411.

6. Smith, et al, "National Curriculum standards," p. 16.

7. Governor Bill Clinton, Opening Remarks at the Education Summit, Charlottesville, Virginia, September 27, 1989.

8. See, for example, P.H. Phenix, Realms of Meaning (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964); P.H. Hirst, Knowledge and the Curriculum (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); John Raven, Education, Values and Society (London: H.K Lewis, 1997).

9. Ernest L. Boyer, High School (New York: Harper and Row, 1983) and Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).

10. Diane Massell, "Three Challenges for National Content Standards." Education and Urban Society, Vol. 26, No. 2 (February 1994): 185-195.

11. See, for example, Eva L. Baker and Regie Stites, "Trends in Testing in the U.S.A." in Susan H. Fuhrman and Betty Malen, eds., The Politics of Curriculum and Testing (London: The Falmer Press, 1991) pp. 139-157.